

# Deployed Old Guard soldiers become first time fathers while deployed to the Horn of Africa

*Photo and Story by Spc. Eric M. McKeeby*

**CAMP LEMONIER, Djibouti**—Spc. George R. Meacham was on the phone with his wife Bethany on Thursday. At 5 p.m. EST she went into labor. But despite four hours of contractions, she was not dilating, so the doctors sent her home.

On Saturday, Meacham, 23, performing weapons maintenance in front of his Camp Lemonier billeting tent, was still waiting for word he has become a father.

"It's been surreal all day," Meacham said. "I've been going about my everyday duties and at the same time I'm thinking my son could be born now, while I'm doing exercises in the middle of Africa."

Later, while Meacham was completing a two mile run, word came that Bethany delivered a boy, Austin, the Meachams' first child.

Meacham, of Fordsville, Ky., is part of the 3<sup>rd</sup> U.S. Infantry Regiment, "The Old Guard," Bravo Company, which arrived at the Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa in December 2003 for tactical missions supporting the Global War on Terrorism.

Since the beginning of the deployment, at least five soldiers in Bravo Co. are or were expectant fathers. Three of those soldiers, Meacham, Spc. Adam C. Kern, and Spc. Lucas R. Peterson, infantry men in the company's second platoon, are fathers for the first time.

While Peterson's daughter, Ariel, was born two days before the company departed Fort Myer, Va., and Kern's son, Adam Jr., arrived Jan. 10, Meacham was the remaining member of the platoon and loosely formed support network to become the father of what has been dubbed a "Bravo baby."

The deployment to CJTF-HOA is the first for a unit of the Old Guard since the Vietnam War, and the preparation and course of the deployment have been filled with an air of historical significance in a regiment with an already-long roster of red-letter days gone by.

First formed in 1784 as the "1<sup>st</sup> American Regiment" and later renamed the 3<sup>rd</sup> U.S. Infantry, the Old Guard is the oldest active infantry unit in the U.S. Army.

The deployment will add another page to a thick book of infantry battles, and the Bravo babies are a part of that history, said Capt. Michael J. Trotter, Bravo company commander.

"I think it's pretty cool," Trotter said.

"Ever since we got word of a possible deployment, it has been a series of firsts. These babies are historical babies—born as the children of the first Old Guard soldiers to be deployed since the Vietnam War," Trotter said.

But if there is a historical relevance to the birth of the Bravo babies, the soldiers admit to having more pressing responsibilities occupy their minds.

Meacham said he focuses on company missions rather than dwelling on his wife and newborn son.

In the midst of training and other Old Guard duties at Myer, he said he was shocked when he

first learned of his wife's pregnancy last May.

"We had always said it's going to be the Lord's timing," Meacham said. "If God wants us to have a baby, he'll bless us with one. Still, it was quite a shock," he said.

A few months after learning that he was going to be a dad, Meacham got word of a potential deployment for his company.

Meacham's worries were less about being absent in the child's early months because of the deployment than about the needs of his wife.

"It wasn't that I was worried that I was going to miss out, I was more worried that she'd miss me," Meacham said.

"Since then, I've found that she's a lot stronger than I gave her credit for," he added.

Kern, 21, of Hughesville, Pa., also had concerns about his wife's ability to handle the pregnancy while he was training and on the deployment.

"I had small worries about her and her safety," Kern said. "But for the most part she was supportive, and I could focus on training," he said.

"She said she'd rather me train until the time I left than not train and something happen over here," Kern said.

Kern, who has been engaged in various force-protection missions including providing security at the site where Army engineers are digging a well, deep in the mountains of rural Djibouti, said he was worried he would be away

from the communications capacities of Camp Lemonier when she gave birth.

When the moment came at 11:30 am EST on Jan. 10, Kern said he felt lucky to be on Camp Lemonier, able to receive and respond to the Red Cross message quickly.

He attributes the accommodation to his chain of command.

"We've gotten great support from the chain of command," Kern said. "They always ask about my wife, and they helped me get the Red Cross message really fast—only an hour and a half after the birth," he said.

Kern said he is still waiting for a photo of Adam Jr. to arrive in the mail, relying in the interim on an image posted online.

Peterson, 23, had the chance to both see and hold his daughter, who was born two days before Bravo Co. departed Fort Myer on Dec. 15.

"I spent almost every moment I could with her," he said. "I only gave myself exactly enough time to get everything packed, see her off one last time and head to Ft. Myer."

On departure day, regimental leadership held a goodbye ceremony, a final chance for soldiers to bid farewell to their loved ones. Peterson's wife Magda and Ariel were still in the hospital.

After arriving at Myer's Comny Hall for the ceremony, Peterson was nearly brought to tears when he found Magda and Ariel in the crowd of well-wishers.

Peterson said the brief encounter was an invaluable memory and credits the Old Guard's leadership, Col. Charles L. Taylor, regimental commander, and Sgt. Maj. Harry

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*Spc. George R. Meacham and his wife Bethany share a final goodbye at Fort Myer's Comny Hall Dec. 15. Bethany delivered a son, Austin, on Saturday, the Meachams' first child. Meacham is one of several soldiers in the Old Guard's Bravo Co. to father a "Bravo baby."*